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SUBJECT: Afghanistan: Refugee, Internally Displaced, Deportee, and Vulnerable Populations in Kabul City and Nationwide

Refs: (A) Kabul 4006; (B) Kabul 568

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Continued security concerns in rural Afghanistan, notably in Helmand Province, have prompted an increase in internally displaced persons (IDPs) seeking a safe haven in Kabul city. Press reports indicate that families who had taken temporary shelter around Lashkar Gah and Kandahar in the south are moving to Kabul because of growing insecurity. In fact, this segment of in-migration to Kabul is a small part of a larger influx of individuals and families driven by a number of factors, including economics, urbanization, and food scarcity. In addition, almost 29,000 of the 208,317 refugees returning to Afghanistan so far this year have settled in Kabul Province. In many cases, USG programs provide the only assistance to these generally poor and marginalized populations.

¶2. (SBU) Historically, USAID's Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA) focuses on IDP issues both in Kabul and across Afghanistan, and the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) focuses on refugees in areas outside of Kabul. As IDPs and refugees put pressure on Afghanistan's (almost non-existent) infrastructure and absorption capacity, these programs remain critical tools for humanitarian relief. The information below sets forth the challenges and the programs designed to address them.

Background: "I am a (Pick One) Refugee/IDP/Deportee/Vulnerable"

¶3. (SBU) Recognition of the different beneficiary populations is key to understanding humanitarian issues in Afghanistan. The media often confuses these groups but the distinctions are important, as different international legal protections, assistance programs, and funding resources often apply.

--Refugee: a person who left Afghanistan due to a well-founded fear of persecution because of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.

-- IDP: a person who fled his/her home or place of residence due to armed conflict, generalized violence, human-made, or natural disasters, but who never crossed an international border.

-- Deportee: in the Afghan context, usually an undocumented economic migrant (typically a young, single man) who was deported from Iran.

Pakistan also deports undocumented Afghans but on a much smaller scale.

-- Vulnerable individual: any refugee, IDP, or deportee who is also an unaccompanied woman or minor, or who is sick, elderly, disabled, or needs immediate humanitarian assistance.

¶4. (U) In Afghanistan, the definitions and legal status of these different categories of people frequently overlap and refugees returning from Pakistan to the southern provinces may then become IDPs as they flee the violence there. This past winter, male deportees from Iran were deemed vulnerable due to the harsh weather and their dire lack of resources. [Comment: While these men are generally not considered vulnerable from a humanitarian perspective, being set adrift without a job or family support makes them very vulnerable from a security perspective.]

Recent IDP and Refugee Movement Into Kabul

¶5. (SBU) The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Kabul reports assisting 685 new IDP families recently displaced from Helmand and Logar provinces due to fighting. However, migration to urban areas is not solely driven by insecurity. UNHCR has also confirmed the arrival of a group of 50 predominantly semi-nomadic Pashtun/Baloch families in the beginning of August. Further relocation of additional Pashtun/Baloch families to Kabul is likely due to the emergence of community ties. In addition, 14 percent of all refugees returning from Pakistan so far this year are settling in their places of origin in Kabul province.

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¶6. (SBU) Other major reasons for migration to urban areas include increased economic prospects, family unification, the overall worldwide trend towards growing urbanization, and increasing food insecurity. Some returning refugees have also become adept at appealing for government or international community assistance and know that high visibility in an urban environment can attract more aid than relative obscurity in their provinces of origin.

¶7. (SBU) In a larger context, the recent influx of IDPs that has gained media attention only represents about 2.5 days worth of in-migration into Kabul, which has been ongoing since early 2002. The rapid growth of Kabul is leading to a very large concentration of displaced persons with very few resources. This can lead in turn to increased instability in the urban area, as well as challenges to the implementation of parts of the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS), such as the goal of expanding piped water to 50 percent of Kabul households by 2013.

One In Five Migrants Settle In Kabul

¶8. (U) Between 2001 and 2008, an estimated 5.6 million people have returned to Afghanistan. The population of Kabul area rapidly expanded during this period from approximately 1.5 million to an estimated 4.5 million people due to an influx of returning refugees, IDPs, economic migrants, and those fleeing conflict areas, as well as net natural growth of the Kabul population. This tripling of population has been accompanied by a four-fold increase in developed urban land. Between 70 and 80 percent of Kabul's population live in squalid conditions in unauthorized, informal areas. Residential densities of two and sometimes three families per housing unit are the norm. To date, few emergency-response agencies have addressed the humanitarian needs generated by the confluence of returnee, IDP, migrant, and resident vulnerable groups in Afghan urban areas. [Comment: Humanitarian organizations have largely focused their resources on rural areas and Afghanistan has seen minimal national and international investment in urban development assistance.]

Internal Displacement Continues But Hard To Measure

¶9. (U) UNHCR reports that most of the estimated 1.2 million IDPs displaced under the Taliban regime have returned home. As of early 2007, UNHCR estimated that 130,000 people in Afghanistan were protracted IDPs, displaced due to insecurity, drought, landlessness, and tribal conflict. An estimated 29,000 people were displaced during 2007, primarily from Kandahar, Helmand, Uruzgan, and Zabul provinces in the south, and Herat and Badghis provinces in the west. No precise tallies of the number of current IDPs exist but UNHCR estimates there are approximately 250,000 IDPs in Afghanistan.

¶10. (U) Although displacements often occur following outbreaks of fighting, UNHCR noted that most IDPs displaced by fighting return to areas of origin once the situation stabilizes. Approximately 21 percent of all IDPs and refugee returnees to Afghanistan since 2002 have settled in the Kabul and Bagrami districts of Kabul Province. Thus, more than one of every five migrants in Afghanistan has moved to just two of the country's 398 provincial districts, both of which are located within Kabul Municipality.

Urban Refugees Drive Up 2008 Repatriation Numbers

¶11. (SBU) Refugee returns to Afghanistan this year have crossed the milestone threshold of 200,000, reaching 208,317 as of August 10. Returns crested in May after the closure of Jalozai camp in Pakistan, but between 8,000 and 10,000 individuals a week are still returning. Repatriation will likely slow in September, with UNHCR repatriation assistance ending October 31. Returns from camps are lower than UNHCR's predictions but higher overall due to more urban-based refugees returning than expected (Refs A and B). Initial predictions anticipated returns from the planned closure of

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Jungle Pir Alizai and Girdi Jungle camps (46,000 residents) but the camps are likely to remain open. For logistical and security reasons, the government of Pakistan has chosen not to close these camps this year.

Refugee Returns Likely To Hit 250,000 in 2008

¶12. (SBU) While slightly over half of refugees returning from Pakistan come from other camps in North Western Frontier Provinces, the other half come from urban areas with rising food and rent prices and high unemployment. UNHCR Kabul now predicts repatriation to reach between 250,000 and 260,000 this year, barring an unlikely late-season closure of Jungle Pir Alizai and Girdi Jungle that would drive the numbers higher. These scenarios are within UNHCR's worst-case contingency planning exercise (Ref B) but could severely strain international community resources. The likelihood of a mass return from Pakistan being completed by December 2009 is improbable and not feasible, given over 2 million refugees in Pakistan hold Proof of Registration cards and close to 400,000 more are potentially eligible for refugee status. The Government of Pakistan is reviewing its current three-year policy on returns and may be amenable to modifications contingent upon adequate support from UNHCR, UNDP, and the international community.

U.S. Humanitarian Assistance Channeled Through International and Non-Governmental Organizations

¶13. (U) The USG supports returning refugees and IDPs in Afghanistan through contributions to international organizations such as UNHCR, which is mandated to provide refugee and, in some cases, IDP protection and assistance, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The International Organization for Migration (IOM) provides humanitarian assistance to vulnerable migrants, including refugees and IDPs. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as CARE International and the International Rescue Committee (IRC), as well as smaller, more local NGOs, also implement refugee

reintegration projects and emergency assistance activities for displaced families and communities.

USAID Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA)
Assistance Programs

¶14. (U) In FY 2008, USAID/OFDA is currently supporting two assistance programs specifically targeting IDPs and vulnerable persons in Afghanistan, valued at nearly \$14 million. USAID/OFDA has provided more than \$1 million through IOM to procure and distribute emergency relief supplies to address the needs of Afghans affected by the severe 2007/2008 winter. To address emergency needs of extremely vulnerable individuals in Kabul Municipality, USAID/OFDA is supporting the second phase of the Kabul Area Shelter and Settlements program (KASS-2), valued at \$12.9 million. Implemented by three NGOs (CARE, CHF, and ACTED), the program will provide shelter assistance to more than 60,000 returnees, IDPs, and other vulnerable Kabul residents. The KASS-2 program will also address associated water, sanitation, hygiene, and livelihoods needs for nearly 100,000 other residents.

¶15. (U) Since 2001, USAID/OFDA has provided more than \$183.8 million in humanitarian assistance programs addressing needs of returning populations, IDPs, and other vulnerable or drought-affected rural populations. Activities have included the provision of emergency relief supplies; support for food and agricultural needs; improvements in shelter and water, sanitation, and hygiene infrastructure; improved coordination and information-sharing among humanitarian agencies; and the establishment of livelihoods opportunities and income generation projects. USAID/OFDA assistance to Afghanistan is in addition to the Mission's emergency food aid efforts and other agricultural programs that also include vulnerable populations.

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State Department Bureau of Populations, Refugees, and Migration
(PRM) Assistance Programs

¶16. (SBU) Since 2002, PRM has spent approximately \$488 million helping over five million returning Afghan refugees reintegrate into their homeland. PRM funds approximately 25 percent of UNHCR's Afghanistan program, which covers support in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran. To date in FY 2008, PRM has contributed \$20.3 million to UNHCR for its Afghan programs and \$22 million to the ICRC for the South Asia region, a portion of which would go to its Afghan program. PRM has also programmed \$10.4 million for NGO projects to provide reintegration support within Afghanistan and basic services to refugees and host communities in Pakistan. Additional support is planned for UNHCR and a number of NGOs before the end of FY 2008.

¶17. (SBU) PRM-funded projects focus on shelter, water and sanitation, primary and community education, basic and maternal health, and livelihoods programs. One new initiative is the Afghan government's Land Allocation Scheme (LAS), where land is set aside for returning refugees, and donors fund shelter and community service projects to turn these areas into viable communities. While 50 percent of PRM's NGO project beneficiaries must be refugees, all activities are designed on community-based reintegration models so that project benefits flow to the rest of the community, including IDPs, vulnerable individuals, and families who never left their homes and are now hosting newly returned refugees and IDPs.

¶18. (SBU) The historically fluid migration patterns within Afghanistan and to its neighboring countries, aggravated by 30 years of war and economic ruin, continue to present numerous humanitarian challenges. As Afghanistan's ability to absorb new returnees and IDPs dwindles, USG programs are some of the positive forces for change in Kabul city and rural areas in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

¶19. (U) This cable has been cleared by Embassy Islamabad.

